

# “To Italy with Love”

## Chapter 1

“So are you going to stop being bisexual now that you’re suddenly marrying a guy?”

Silence, heavy and thick, dropped over the sunny Italian terrace where seven women lay, half-dozing in a post-dinner haze. Iris stared at the one who’d spoken, Chrisanne, in disbelief. Aisha, the bride-to-be, only shook her head, smiling at the much younger girl in amusement. She didn’t look at all insulted.

“I wouldn’t say sudden,” Aisha said. She rolled over on the lounge chair and closed her eyes as if that was all that needed to be said.

Iris sat up in her chair, cradling her glass of limoncello against a spill, and came to her friend’s defense, although Aisha was usually the last person who needed defending. “I doubt it’s sudden since she’s marrying the guy she’s been openly dating for two years.” She wrinkled her nose like she smelled something bad.

Chrisanne was a stranger to Iris. They’d met less than a day before when Chrisanne arrived at the villa where Aisha was already hosting the bridal party in preparation for her wedding. Iris didn’t even know how Aisha met Chrisanne, a Jamaican-born girl in her mid twenties who’d just graduated from college and was rude as hell. Iris was Jamaican too but felt no solidarity with the girl. What was Chrisanne thinking challenging Aisha like that? That wasn’t the kind of thing you said to anybody on the weekend of their wedding.

“It’s cool, Iris.” Aisha made a dismissive motion with her own glass of limoncello, dripping some of the liqueur over the back of her hand. “That’s just how she is. It’s okay.”

Chrisanne, who’d coincidentally been in Italy for the summer as a present to herself before starting a new job at some big accounting firm, had basically invited herself to the wedding. Aisha was too much of a sweetheart to say no to the loudmouthed girl. All four bridesmaids looked at her like they wanted to strangle her, including Iris, who was the maid of honor and never before thought of herself as a violent person.

“Bitch, chill.” Imani, one of the bridesmaids, said. She was from Philly, had been one of the first straight women to accept and love Aisha after she left the land of the pussy eaters. She would also undeniably be the first to slap a bitch—that bitch being Chrisanne—if she stepped out of line.

But Chrisanne apparently wasn’t one to take a subtle hint to shut the hell up. “What? I’m just curious.” She waved around her martini glass from the wide stone railing of the balcony where she sat, precariously balanced. A girl who liked to literally be on the edge. Far below her, the sea lapped at the cliff-strewn coast line. The pink liquid sloshed around in her martini glass but did not spill. “I’d never heard of something like this in my life. In my world, you’re either a dyke or a bi-curious chick out to get your rocks off having some girl eat your pussy for a few months. I’ve never known of a die-hard lezzie all of a sudden deciding she didn’t like the taste of pussy anymore and going so far as to latch on full time, marriage and all, to the dick.”

Iris was starting to seriously re-think her stance on violence. “If you think Aisha is some sort of traitor to lesbians by living her own damn life then you better get your stuff and leave.” Iris knew more than anyone how much her friend had agonized over the changes she’d been going through about her sexuality. None of this had been easy for her.

“I don’t think she’s a traitor,” Chrisanne said. “I’m just asking.” She shrugged, the see-through white blouse that showed off a lacy black bra and propped up C-cups temporarily distracting Iris from why she was so pissed.

Imani cut her eyes at the girl and the rest of the bridesmaids looked so much like swans with ruffled feathers that Iris worried for a minute they would peck Chrisanne’s eyes out.

“It’s all right,” Aisha said. “For real. She’s not saying anything I haven’t heard over the last few years.”

But none of the women relaxed. They all looked at Chrisanne like the interloper she was. Just the day before, she’d come down from Florence where she’d been hanging with some American friends who had a summer home in the city. According to the conversation Iris overheard, Chrisanne saw Aisha’s Facebook status updates about Italy and invited herself down, saying she was bored with her friends and their aggressively bougie ways. Which was saying something since Iris thought Chrisanne was the most bougie woman she’d ever met. San Pellegrino with every meal. No potential girlfriend who made below a certain amount of money. No natural hair. And certainly no one who couldn’t afford to travel with her on her mandatory two foreign trips per year. All three of those criteria knocked Iris firmly out of the running, but she never considered herself a candidate for the position anyway. She narrowed her eyes at the twenty-six year old.

She was rude and didn’t give a damn about anybody’s feelings. Too bad she was sexy, and so very hard to ignore.

Chrisanne tilted her head to look at Iris. Her hair, straightened and thick, rippled over her shoulders. She frowned when she caught Iris’ gaze.

Iris turned away and tuned back into the conversation on the terrace in time to hear Aisha say, “I’m still bi, Chrisanne. Just because Marco and I are together doesn’t stop me from being attracted to women.”

“So will you be in an open relationship or something?” Chrisanne knocked back the last of her martini and settled the empty glass on the table with a clack of glass on glass. “I can’t imagine giving up the pussy, no matter how fine my man is.”

“You don’t even *want* a man,” Imani muttered, eyeing Chrisanne from over the edge of her champagne glass.

Hands braced on the stone balcony on either side of her hips, Chrisanne leaned in to say something.

*That’s it.* Iris cut her off. “I think you’ve said enough about this for the day.”

She stood up and fluffed out the wide skirt of her dress. The cotton stuck to her thighs in the heat but she would never be ready to change it in favor of shorts and a tank top like Aisha and the bridesmaids had. The red and white cherry-patterned dress was vintage 1950’s and belled out around her hips, emphasizing instead of detracting from her femininity. She wore her natural hair

in a pompadour like Janelle Monáe, a look she'd discovered years ago and stuck with because it made her feel pretty.

"The party is in a couple of hours and I think Aisha should rest up for it." Iris glanced at her friend who looked a little tired but also a little tipsy. Nothing a disco nap couldn't fix. "Come on, honey." She put a hand on Aisha's shoulder. "Go take a nap. I'll wake you when it's time to get ready for the party."

She didn't wait for Aisha to agree, just helped her to her feet and pointed her through the wide French doors and toward her room. Once Aisha left, Imani gave up her appearance of not giving a fuck.

"Bitch, control yourself." She stood up to confront Chrisanne, hands propped on her hips like she was ready to grab the Vaseline and snatch off her earrings. "That's our friend out there," Imani said. "This is her wedding. Don't make her uncomfortable by bringing up shit she's already dealt with."

Chrisanne didn't look worried, although in her pastel blue romper and high heels she didn't look able to defend herself against Imani's pointed aggression. "Aisha and I talked about this before. She knows I'm just playing devil's advocate. You all are the ones getting your panties in a bunch. She's fine."

"You're missing the point." Iris fluffed her skirt again, encouraging the breeze to blow over her faintly damp thighs.

"And what point is that?" Chrisanne showed no signs of backing down.

"Aisha lost a lot of friends when she came out as bi. You asking her all those questions makes it seem like you'll be another one of those."

Imani narrowed her eyes at Chrisanne. "Are you one of those?"

Chrisanne sucked her teeth. One hundred percent Jamaican in that moment. "I don't give a shit who she fucks. I'm still her friend and we still have fun. She knows I'm just trying to satisfy my curiosity."

"Well, don't satisfy it at her expense," Iris said. "That's not what she needs right now."

Chrisanne shrugged. "Fine. Cool. I won't ask any more *awkward* questions." She looked meaningfully at Iris before she picked up a pale pink sweater and left the terrace in a clack of high heels.

Imani stared at Chrisanne's departing back like she wanted to set it on fire. "Why is she even here anyway?"

Iris shrugged. She had nothing to say when that was the very same question she wanted to ask.